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Hog Creek Review



Dinner at the Smith-Malbec's

"Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage..."

--William Shakespeare

She came at him with a knife, the feminist hell fires burning in her eyes. Her jade-black hair was flowing behind her like raging rapids over the rocks of destruction. The knife's point aimed directly at his heart, the one he had promised her years ago, not knowing she would be taking it literally. Had he known, he would probably not have used such words to symbolize his love for her.

The life, once led, began to flash before his eyes like a movie with the fast forward button stuck on the remote. The day they met at Taylor University, their first date at a quaint Italian restaurant, when he proposed on the quad before graduate school graduation, and the birth of their only child seemed to be so distant now. How had the intertwining of lives gone so wrong? When had they changed so much? The life they lived was like everyone else's, he thought. They worked at Kenyon College during the day and then came home to eat, argue, and work some more. Weren't all relationships like this? The home he grew up in definitely was the same, with the exception of his mother, staying home to keep house and have dinner on the table promptly as the sun became low on the horizon. But that was another era when this was expected of women. Where had this all gone wrong?

In the final instant before the blade would be near enough to almost smell the metallic surface, Joe turned and it became embedded in the space that he once filled. Sweat pooled on his brow and his heart felt as if it were going to jump out of his skin, almost as if it were begging to be impaled on its thin sharp edge. He could almost see the stains begin to

form on the pits of his white cotton oxford, the type you need spray and wash to remove. Adrenaline pumping hard. Survival instincts had taken over and he was faced with the rush that was left in its wake.

Attention now turned to the knife. Seeing it almost for the first time, although they had used it for years to slice and dice their vegetarian diet. The 8" steel blade had not yet moved from its new home in the plaster of the once unmarred wall. Black handle ergonomically designed for comfort. Missing from a set that was a wedding gift from Aunt Mable. The Strider logo taunting him as if it were saying, "you got lucky this time mister. Next time I won't miss my mark." She saw the line of vision gravitating to the instrument of destruction as if a laser pointer was emitting from his eyes. She lunged, but his stealth and maneuverability was no match, a throw back to the day when he was on the varsity relay team. The weapon was now safely resting between his trembling fingers.

"What the fuck Liz?" were the only words that would escape his mouth.

"You've been talking to our students again," was her trite reply.

His bewilderment was replaced with recognition in less than an instant. He could tell his wife was referring to one of the classes he taught.

"It's a creative writing class; I tell them stories to inspire them, get them to write."

"They don't have to be about me - about us."

"I don't understand what the problem is."

"No, you never understand. You never think about my feelings. How does it make me look to them? Am I really that difficult to get along with? If I were so picky, why did you marry me in the first place?"

He let out a light chuckle, probably not the right emotion for this instance.

"Ahh, you heard about the blouse."

The telltale spark lit up her eyes. The twinkle of the lights on the tree. Wrapping paper floating around the room. She had asked for one thing that Christmas Day, a blouse. It had to have exactly 8 buttons, no more and no less. Emerald green was the color she had asked for, the color of her eyes. V-neck to show that she was still a woman, but conservative to show she would not be objectified. Three-quarter sleeves to allow her movement while

she taught. She didn't think this was too much to ask. A slight chill filled the room. He knew she had heard about the story he told the students about the time he went Christmas shopping for Liz with their daughter. Picky as she was, the list of details she expected in a blouse, the only gift she had wanted, did not exist in any place known to man. He had tried his best. Two shirts, not one, was his compromise. Details equally divided between the two.

"It has nothing to do with the damn blouse. It has everything to do with the way you made me appear."

"Honey, it was just a story, something to get the creative juices flowing to write a parody. Give them a base to work from, find humor in life."

As Joe searched her face, the muscles remained the same. No relaxation. Lines unwavering from the position they had started to possess. Making a home around the eyes he once had found a sparkle in. The skin of her forehead stretched as tight as a drum. A red flush sitting on the apples of her cheeks.

"Inspire them, making me the butt of your jokes? I teach them also, don't forget. I have to see their faces staring back, wondering if they are thinking I am a daemon from the underworld as I am trying to teach them romantic poetry. I hear what they say in the hall outside my office, the quiet whispers as they pass, thinking I can't hear them. The laughs from the learning center as I descend the stairs to teach my next class or go to lunch."

"They are kids, they talk."

"They are **OUR STUDENTS**, some things should remain private," she said interrupting me. "Our lives should be just that, **OURS**, not subject for public fodder. And what am I supposed to do when one is brave enough to come tell me these stories? Just laugh it off, act like it never happened? Should I take a page from your book? Maybe once talk about you and how you proposed. Tell them, most women are wooed like 19th century nobility, but instead of a sonnet I received, *would you like to lower your tax burden?* Your humor may have won me over then, but it has become irritating now."

The room fell silent; only their breathing could be heard, disturbing the air around them. A line drawn in the sand. The calm between the storm. Flashes of lightning shot behind Joe's eyes. A closing book and a slight snore. Waking to the sound of a slamming

book as one rested in his lap. He had fallen asleep while reading Liz's new article in the *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, "The Awakening: Path to Gender Freedom or Oppression by Suicide?" She had spent six months on the research for this article, taking a sabbatical from teaching to stay a semester in Louisiana, and allowing him to teach her classes. Liz felt this would be good for Joe's chance at tenure this time, being beaten by the young PH.D that had studied at Oxford and was barely out of diapers.

The little pipsqueak had waltzed onto campus and was hired with tenure from the start. Dr. Johnson had only published one book compared to Joe's seven collections of poetry. Although the review board wouldn't say it, they wanted a spry young lad that looked like James Franco who had inherited a British accent from his three years with his nose in a book and weekends at the local pub. The adolescent doctorate was eye candy to attract young and pretty girls to the Literature Department. With girls came young men. The increased enrollment would raise the budget for the department and allow more room in other areas of study for new students, thus increasing the overall income of the university. There was no room for a middle aged associate professor who went to State and paid his way through with exotic dancing.

Joe was to read this article she had written and write a peer review, yet he couldn't stay awake. Even with the deep love he has for his wife, her interests were not his, they bored him to death, made him want to rip out his eyes, and drink something that would send him to have his stomach pumped, which would be more exciting. The last review had finished worse than this one was starting. It had read like a form letter from a publishing company detailing a rejection. Liz had said to be honest that time and he was. His goal at redemption would be better, even if it hadn't started so well. Joe had needed her pull with the review board to stay at the university. Although she knew this would increase their income and give him job security, sometimes Joe wondered if Liz enjoyed pulling the string of the yo-yo that was his life.

After the review was published, even with glowing praise from Joe, Liz nagged about unintentional ambiguities in his review that could be construed as equivocations against her work, making him feign the bed that evening and sleep on the couch. As with most other

wives, he had to listen to her moaning on a weekly basis, which led to arguments on his part, when he did not take out the trash at exactly the time she had intended for this chore.

For three months, Joe had lived in fear that she would sabotage his chances with the committee. No sleep as he tossed and turned. Barely eating what was in front of him. When the day had come, he entered the boardroom, took his seat with hesitation, sweat forming on his palms. The committee had granted his tenure on a probationary basis. Their hesitation, although unwarranted in his eyes, had been overturned by the rapport he had created with the students in Dr. Liz's class. The board stated, *Although his attention to detail and organization was not to her standards, the students had come to enjoy and crave the ease at which they could approach Joe*. He would be required to teach the same class again next semester for Liz in addition to his own enormous list of poetry classes. All this was required with his next book published before the year ended.

When Liz had heard the result, of course praise needed to go to her. Had she not relayed what the students had told her in conferences, after the class for the next semester had begun, he would not have even this glimmer of tenure from the review board. By Liz doing research, she felt she gave him the added edge to further his career. She made sure that when all the family was told of his promotion, even if it was probationary, she was the angel of mercy who had lifted him to greater heights.

The culmination of her boasting and taking credit for his career had led to something building within him, a venom that was forcing to destroy him. First, a story told to his creative writing class gave a little release. This release felt good for Joe, a new beginning. Each time the stories grew grander. Satirical in nature, truths hidden deep within that had welled up within his soul. Release at any cost. The temperature of the room began to drop like the pressure in Joe's veins as he looked into Liz's eyes at this moment.

Liz's arms began to slacken, falling to rest at the sides of her small frame. Cold mahogany. Murmuring voices around the wood. Review board giving him a chance this time. She had been the reason for his tenure and he repaid her with whispers of her life. Incidental facts were the beginning. Complaints of home life. Fighting over chores or burning of dinner. These had begun to grow into more personal aspects. Nagging to dominance;

dominance to total fascist authoritarianism. He portrayed her as the Hitler of the House. He could not eat, shit, or breathe without begging her for permission first.

The whispers soon took a life of their own with the undergraduates. A wave of gossip spreading from student to student. Hitting the metaphoric beach of other classes. As much as they wouldn't admit it, professors listen to what is said in-between their classes; the moment right before they walk in the door. Awkward silence always follows, but they have heard what was said. Just as the students, instructors spread the information amongst each other. A quick pop in the office next door when it was open. Polite hello. Have you heard about . . .? Liz had tried to avoid this, but she was known to fall short and partake once in awhile. Now it was the echoes of her life resonating across the academic field of learning.

Students had quickly hushed when she walked in the door. Colleagues the same. The glances as she walked to the cafeteria for lunch. Quiet whispers had all built up. The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back had been the letter she received from her publisher today. *Regretfully we have decided to go with another submission . . . Dr. Johnson explores a new territory . . . If you would be willing to freshen up your approach . . . Please feel free to submit in the future.* Dr. Johnson had schmoozed the publisher, her publisher. Although there was no proof, Liz was sure he had used Joe's stories as ammunition to kill her book. The book she needed to publish and keep her tenure. After all she had done to give Joe his career, Liz couldn't help think he had ruined hers.

The clank of the knife hitting the floor brought Liz to the present. It had slipped from Joe's hands to rest on the hardwood. The fires of anger had burned to an ember of defeat in her eyes. The flushness that had adorned her face faded to the white of polished marble. He began to see his wrongs for the first time, understand that maybe she was right. What the knife had failed to accomplish, her look had. The pain that he inflicted on her was more than any knife could do cutting flesh. His heart felt as if it had been ripped out, not by physical means, but by words, the symbols and signifiers that stood in place of them.

"Didn't you know that this would happen? I mean you joked about it in class already. Told the students I was growing night crawlers and you would soon be food for worms in our basement. Deep down you knew it would come to this one day, even if subconsciously,"

was her anthem of defeat.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think, I don’t think sometimes. The stories just escape, they want to get out. They are in my poetry, my journal, and my classes. They have a life of their own, they want to live like you or I. I can’t stop them, they force their way out into the world like my children.”

“It needs to stop. I don’t know how much more of this I can take. I don’t know how much more of this I should have to take. Most people would have left at half of the things you have put me through.”

“I know, I promise I will try harder to stop. I will make the best attempt that is humanly possible to think of you before I open my mouth. Your feelings will become my feelings, our feelings. I don’t want us to fight anymore. Can we go back to the way we were, the graduate students so in love, ready to take on the world around them?”

“Let’s just eat. I am tired of talking. Tired of all the promises.”

This was not the first time she had approached the subject. But in the past, the arguments had never spiraled to the point she would try to kill him. What had made an argument evolve to murder this time, he wondered? Was this a menstrual cycle gone horribly wrong? Why had this become the time and place for her to break and move towards murder?

He noticed the table for the first time. The oval surface was covered with the lace tablecloth her grandmother had made in the old country, before the great war that devastated their vineyards, forcing them to flee to the new world. Its once-stark white had faded to an antique tea stained look. He began to picture their life like this cloth. Intricate weave pattern holding them together, well worn but remaining sturdy through the ages. Comfortableness he could conform to. Knowing someone completely and aging with them, not against. The candles burning in the bronze candle sticks his father had given to his mother on their eighth wedding anniversary. The crystal wine glasses, a present to her mother, celebrating fifteen years of love between a couple. How these families had combined over time creating this new home. There was a bottle of the Malbec wine, open and breathing. He knew this was a celebration, one that had escaped him.

“It’s our anniversary?”

“Yes, and once again you forgot. Let’s just eat; the veggie loaf is getting cold.”

It was his favorite. She had worked so hard to make this a special night and he had ruined it. She wasn’t mad about the stories, school, or classes. It was him. How he got caught up in academia and forgot the most important life possessions. This, their love and the day he meant to celebrate it. He began to eat slowly looking for the words to make this all better, make it right and perfect for her. For once in life, words escaped him; they were no longer his friend. That was the instant sadness descended, slowly creeping through the fiber of his being, almost like sleepiness.

A smile began to form on Liz’s face. Not so much a smile, but a sneer. One a person has when they have acquired revenge. Maybe this wasn’t sadness, but true sleep crouching upon him. The room began to dim like the closing scene of a movie, shrinking to that last beam of light as his head hit the table. The last thing he would hear was her say:

“I knew the knife would never work.”